

## *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* (痴婆子傳)

# On the Tension between Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Autonomy of Chinese Woman in the Ming Period

### Introduction: Chinese Sexuality

Serious academic research on Chinese sexuality in modern times began only with the publication of the two books by the Dutch Sinologist Robert van Gulik, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period* (1951) and *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (1961). Douglas Wile in his book on Chinese sexual yoga rightly assesses the contribution of these two books: “[They] stand to this day as the only book-length scholarly monographs on sexual customs, erotic art and literature, and esoteric sexual practices in China. They have the further distinction of being virtually the sole source for secondhand studies and translations.”<sup>1</sup> Van Gulik was indeed a fervent and extremely serious Sinologist whose interest in Chinese sexuality was originally only a side issue.<sup>2</sup> His purpose in these two books is to dispel the ignorance in both the Western and the Chinese world regarding the nature of Chinese sexuality. In his words:

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Wile, *The Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics, Including Women's Solo Meditation Texts*, Albany: State University of New York, 1992, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Robert van Gulik (1910-1967) was a Dutch career diplomat and at the same time a distinct Sinologist. His knowledge of Chinese culture and his excellent command of the language are reflected in all of his publications on China, which, besides the two classics on Chinese sexuality, range from books on the Chinese lute, on Chinese pictorial art and on the gibbon in China, to a long series of detective stories featuring the Chinese statement of the Tang Dynasty. For details, see Chen Chih-Mai, “Sinologue Extraordinaire” in *Hemisphere*, Australia, 1968, and the introduction by Paul R. Goldin to R. H. van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, pp. xv-xxv.

An examination of the material thus assembled convinced me that the current foreign conception of the depraved and abnormal sexual habits of the ancient Chinese was completely wrong. As might be expected of a highly cultured and thoughtful people like the Chinese, they did indeed since early times give a great deal of attention to sex matters....One of the main arguments of the present publication is to refute such arbitrary allegations, and to show that until the 13th century the separation of the sexes was not strictly enforced, and sexual relations freely talked and written about.

The ancient Chinese had indeed no reason for hiding their sexual life. Their handbooks of sex prove clearly that their sexual habits were healthy and normal—at any rate by the norms of the polygamic system that has prevailed in China from the oldest known times till recent years.<sup>3</sup>

Van Gulik's major arguments of Chinese sexual naturalism are based on the analysis of his rediscovery of the hitherto unnoticed writings on the "art of the bedchamber," which were apparently long forgotten in China but were preserved in Japan.<sup>4</sup> From his translation, interpretation and discussion of the original texts, a new paradigm of research in Chinese sexology has emerged. The fundamental texts are the *Handbooks of Sex*, that is, the "art of the bedchamber" (*Fang-zhong-shu*), and the subject matters are Daoism, the *yin-yang* theory, sexual medicine, sexual practices and sexual psychology. This paradigm has set the direction for research on Chinese sexuality in the last fifty years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974, p. xxxii.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese scholar Ye Dehui (1864-1927) was the pioneer in restoring five ancient Chinese handbooks of sex from the Japanese *Ishinpo*, see van Gulik, p. 122. For a more detailed discussion of the development of modern Chinese sexology, see Douglas Wile, *op. cit.*, p. 51-56.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Wile's book, *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics, Including Women's Solo Meditation Texts*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992, is an excellent example of this research paradigm. Wile's major concern is a systematic study of the "written record of Chinese sexual yoga, which may be defined for the present as the practice of sexual intercourse for the purpose of intergender harmony, physical and psychological health, and ascended states or immortality" (p. 4). For a critical and comprehensive evaluation of Western studies of Chinese sexology, see pp. 56-69.

It is obvious that the sexual ideas and practices in all those handbooks of sex are integral parts of Chinese culture, but it would certainly be an exaggeration to identify the contents of the *Handbooks of Sex* with Chinese sexuality *per se*. The *yin-yang* theory, which is the basic presupposition of Chinese sexology, emphasizes the reciprocity and harmony between the two sexes. It assumes an equal status between male and female at a cosmological level, on which sexual intercourse is only an instance. However, such is not the case when sexuality is seen outside the “bedchamber” in situations of everyday life. The dominant Confucian patriarchal society falls short of an equal and liberal view on sexuality. Traditional Chinese men had all the benefits of sexual naturalism whereas women suffered from it. Hence, a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese sexuality should not be limited to the sole study of the *Handbooks of Sex*. It is apparent that these books are very interesting and that they surpass Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, the Indian *Kama sutra* and even the modern *The Joy of Sex* in all of the following aspects: quantity of the literature, depth of medical knowledge, variety of sexual techniques, amount of philosophical contents and insights, and range and depth of psychological observations. There have been a considerable number of publications cashing on the secrets of Chinese sexuality since van Gulik’s books.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, materials other than the *Handbooks of Sex* should not be neglected. Van Gulik admitted, in the preface to *Sexual Life in Ancient China*, that he “came upon the subject of ancient Chinese sexual life by accident, and [that his] qualifications for writing about it are limited to those of an Orientalist with a general interest in anthropology.”<sup>7</sup> In short, van Gulik considered himself not as a sexologist but a Sinologist in a more classical sense, that is, his genuine interests were on the broader areas of literature, art and culture. Indeed, his insightful examination of Chinese sexuality in paintings and literary writings other than in the *Handbooks of Sex* has not generated many studies and researches in this direction.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most important of all books on Chinese erotica are Akira Ishihara and Howard Levy, *The Dao of Sex*, Yokohama: General Publishing Co., 1969 and also Douglas Wile, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Robert van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. xxxvii.

<sup>8</sup> Chinese erotica are of course a favorable subject of many popular books since there is no lack of curious customers who want to know more about Chinese secrets and mysteries of sex. John Byron’s handsome and well-illustrated book, *Portrait of a Chinese Paradise—Erotica and Sexual Customs of the Late Qing Period*, 1987, is a good example of this trade.

The purpose of this chapter is to look at traditional Chinese sexuality as presented in literary writings, in particular, in writings of the genre of the “*yan-qing* novel,” which belongs at the same time to the category of banned books. I take one novelette from the Ming dynasty, *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* (literally: *The Story of an Indulgent Woman*), as an outstanding example of a “*yan-qing* novel” that touches on the tension between sexuality and morality. The story contains explicit descriptions of sex and for this reason was banned in both the Ming and Qing dynasties. According to van Gulik, the book was not extant in imperial China but was preserved in a monastery in Kyoto, Japan.<sup>9</sup> The importance of this much neglected and much forgotten “pornographic” novelette lies not only in its particular style of presentation—an autobiographical memoir by a woman, which was most uncommon in Chinese literature—but also in its description of the heroine’s struggle for sexual autonomy, thus disclosing the blatant inequality between the two genders.

Under the traditional patriarchal culture, women were objects of exploitation, despite the apparent philosophical emphasis on harmony in both Confucianism and Daoism as well as the theory of reciprocity and equality implicit in the cosmology of sex. In *Chi-po-zi-zhuan*, however, the author shows so sympathetic an attitude toward the heroine as was most unusual among the “*yan-qing* novels” at the author’s time. In a certain sense, *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* is perhaps the first feminist novel ever written in Chinese. The novelette is a psychological presentation of the female sexual experience from adolescence to mature womanhood, and the descriptions are given in rich details and telling observations. Such a presentation is unprecedented in Chinese literature, and is unmatched even by the later pornographic novels depicting female sexuality. Furthermore, the novelette, though “pornographic” in nature, implies a rebellious spirit and can be seen as a critique by some enlightened intellectuals of the morality prevailing the historical period in which the book was written. Nonetheless, the importance of this novelette, though in many respects a unique one, must not be overstated, because after all, Chinese novels are traditionally not considered by the learned class as part of main-stream literature. In addition, sexuality and erotic love are never topics for discussion by any Chinese philosophers. This novelette is but a tiny protest to the prevailing conservatism of the time.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. 271 n.

My interest in the novelette is therefore not purely literary, but also philosophical. In fact, I have perceived in the novelette a number of questions concerning sexuality and morality against the background of Chinese philosophical tradition. Analysis of *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* may serve as a starting point for exploration into the cosmological and ethical dimensions of female sexuality in the Chinese patriarchal tradition. Meanwhile, I would like to examine also the intellectual background for the rebellious intent embodied in the story.

### Banned-books and *Chi-po-zi-zhuan*

Freedom of expression and publication has never been part of the Chinese tradition. Ever since the Chin dynasty (221-206 BCE), literary writings were censored and banned, mostly for political reasons rather than for moral or religious considerations. In most cases, books were banned when the contents were considered, whether explicitly or implicitly, to be in conflict with the contemporary ruling ideology. Sometimes, they were banned simply because they incurred the disapproval of the emperor or of those in power. The worst time was in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) when numerous books of diversified contents were banned and their authors executed. Philosophical writings and historical interpretations outside the official line were of the top priority to be suppressed, alongside with many literary writings like poetry and novels, even when the subject matters were entirely innocent and merely entertaining. Erotic books were of course not allowed to be circulated.<sup>10</sup>

Erotic novels, or rather, the *yan-qing* novels, were in their heyday during the second half of the Ming dynasty.<sup>11</sup> They may be classified as pornographic literature—a term borrowed from Western culture—since

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the history of Chinese banned books and their summaries, see An Pingqiu and Zhang Peiheng eds.: *Zhongguo jinshu daguan* (A Complete Introduction of Chinese Banned Books), Shanghai: Wenhua Chubanshe, 1990. According to van Gulik, most erotic novels disappeared in China during the Qing dynasty; however, many survived in Japan, either in the original Ming prints or in manuscript copies. See van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

<sup>11</sup> See van Gulik's discussion in *The Erotic Colour Prints*, pp. 105-148, and *The Sexual Life of Ancient China*, pp. 285-317. For a recent and pioneering work on the subject of sexuality in classical Chinese novels, see Kang Zhengguo: *Congshen fengyuejian*, Taipei: Maitian, 1996.

all these novels contain explicit descriptions of sexual acts. However, the connotation of the word “pornography” is value-loaded in the West because of the long-held negative attitude towards sex, whereas the Chinese term “*yan-qing* novels” does not necessarily imply something bad and immoral.<sup>12</sup> For example, the famous novels of the late Ming period, *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin-ping-mei*, 1617) and *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rou-pu-tuan*, around 1644), belong to the genre of “*yan-qing* novels.” Though the authorship of the novelette in question in this chapter, *Chi-po-zi-zhuan*, is unclear as anonymity was the usual practice for stories in this genre, the date of publication can be ascertained: it must have been composed in the mid-16th century, well before the time when *Rou-pu-tuan* was written.<sup>13</sup> *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* can therefore be considered as one of the earliest erotic novels in China.<sup>14</sup> In terms of its length the novelette is comparatively slight as it contains only two chapters. It was written in classical literary style, *wen-yan*, hence the language is compact and concise, and thus contrasted with the oral style, *baihua*, in vernacular stories. One significant feature of the novelette, as mentioned above, is its format of presentation—an autobiographical account given by the heroine—which might well be the first of its kind in all Chinese novels.

Van Gulik rendered the Chinese title *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* as “Biography of a Foolish Woman.”<sup>15</sup> The translation of “*chi*” as “foolish” completely misses the original meaning. In fact, “*chi*” has no connotation of stupidity nor foolishness whatsoever, but simply means “obsession” or “indulgence”; see the frequent association of the word “*chi*” with “*qing*.” Hence “*qing-chi*” means the passionate indulgence of love.

<sup>12</sup> Van Gulik refers to these novels as pornographic. The term *Yan-qing* novels is proposed by Lin-chen in his article, “Sexual description in *yan-qing* novel and novels,” in Zhang Guoxing: *Zhongguo gudai xiaoshuode xingmiaoxie*, Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1993, pp. 31-52.

<sup>13</sup> *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* is mentioned in the text of the third chapter of *Rou-pu-tuan*. Li Mengseng dated the publication to the mid Ming dynasty, Zhonguo, 李夢生：《中國禁毀小說百話》，上海：上海古籍出版社，1994，p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Erotic novels were rare before the Ming dynasty. One exception was Zhang-zhuo’s (657-730) *You-xian-ku* in the Tang dynasty, in which explicit sexual acts were portrayed at the end of the novel; nevertheless, sex was not the major issue. See van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>15</sup> Robert van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. 271 n. Patrick Hanan translated the title as *The Life of the Foolish Woman*, in Patrick Hanan, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

Incidentally, the alleged editor of this novel is called *qing-chi-zi*. In the short preface to the novel, the meaning of indulgence, *chi*, is explained in relation to three important ideas: *qing*, amorous affection; *xing*, human nature or essence; and *xin*, mind in a philosophical manner. In the preface it is stated as follows:

It is always the case that the movement of the human nature (*xing*) is amorous affection (*qing*). The manifestation of human nature is amorous affection whereas amorous affection comes out of human nature. At the same time, human nature is actualized in the mind (*xin*). When the mind is not upright, it becomes deviated. If it is deviated, it is uncontrollable. If the amorous affection comes out freely from whatever the mind desires, the result can hardly indulge (*chi*).<sup>16</sup>

We shall return to the relation between these three important concepts later for their association with the philosophical problem of sexuality and morality.

## The Story

The story of *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* is told from the first-person point of view, in the form of a memoir told to a young traveler by a seventy-year-old woman. A-Na, the heroine of the story, was born to a scholar family. She first developed her sexual awareness around the age of 12 and was then initiated into the meaning of sex and the naturalism of sexual intercourse by a female neighbor, who gave her detailed descriptions of the pain and joy of sexual acts. Seducing her cousin to be her first sexual partner, A-Na tried out her sexual fantasies, but the losing of their virginity together was not a very happy experience. The cousin, who after several attempts began to enjoy sex with A-Na, was separated from A-Na by her mother. A-Na's next lover, the son of a servant, gave her much enjoyable sexual experience. At the age of 17, A-Na was married to the second son of a Confucian scholar of noble descent. Having successfully put on an act as if she was still a virgin, A-Na won her husband's praise, on the day following the wedding night, that she was indeed a well-educated lady with good propriety. After a year, her husband left home for his study. A-Na, feeling lonely, seduced the

<sup>16</sup> 「從來情者性之動也。性發為情，情由於性，而性實具於心者也。心不正則偏，偏則無拘無束，隨其心之所欲，發而為情，未有不流於痴矣。」

servant of her older brother-in-law and they happily indulged in sex. One day they were caught during intercourse by another servant, who threatened to tell others if A-Na did not have sex with him. Reluctantly she did. As she returned to her room hastily she ran into her older brother-in-law and he raped her. One day she accidentally discovered the affair between her father-in-law and the wife of her older brother-in-law. They dragged her into the sex game and she was raped by the old man, who unashamedly claimed that the wives of his sons were also his. From then on she continued her sexual relationships with all these men. Subsequently, her younger brother-in-law, an actor, a monk and his master all became her sexual partners. Altogether she had sexual relationship with 13 different men. In between, she had a son but did not know who the father was. Her affairs with these men came to a halt when she met and fell in love with the tutor of her now grown-up son. She soon gave herself exclusively to him while ignoring all other men, who, jealous and angry, reported A-Na's new affair to her husband. Her husband, being kept in ignorance for all these years, was so angry that he threatened to kill her immediately. Eventually, she was saved with her son's pleading but was banished from the family forever. She was then 39. From then on until the age of 70 when she retold the story to the young traveler, A-Na lived a life of remorse for her previous deeds.

Several questions can be asked of the story:

1. Is it a purely pornographic novel, aiming at exciting the lust of the readers? What is the significance of sex in the story?
2. Who are the readers? Unlike other vernacular stories for the populace in the same period, this story was written in classical literary style, which implies that it was meant for the literati.
3. Why did the author employ the style of a woman's memoir? Autobiography as a genre of Chinese literature, especially used in novel writing, was already very rare. A woman's first-person account is even more remarkable. Was it meant for an "educated" female readership?
4. A-Na was brought up in an educated family and she was later married to a Confucian scholar's gentry family. According to the legal practice at that time, she had indeed committed very serious crimes: adultery and most serious of all, incest. All these crimes should lead to capital punishment. However, the author just let her be banished from her family and even live up to the advanced age of seventy. What is the "moral lesson" of this story? And why was the author so lenient to the heroine?



The answer to these questions will open a re-examination of the idea of sexuality in Chinese culture. The theoretical foundation for sexuality in Chinese culture was laid in *The Book of Changes (Yi-jing)*. From this foundation came two different developments: the sexual naturalism embodied in the Daoist conception, as presented in the *Handbooks of Sex*; and the subsumption of sexuality under the Confucian moral system, a system which accounts for the kinship structure and gender differentiation. Both developments imply an objectification of woman: in sexual naturalism, the taking of woman as an instrument by which man achieves longevity; and in Confucianism, the taking of woman as a means by which man maintains the family structure. As far as Chinese sexual culture is concerned, woman was the object of exploitation and suppression. The female gender was in the final analysis reduced to two roles: a moral agent for maintaining the order of kinship, *ren-lun*, and a playmate for obtaining sexual pleasure, *ren-yu*. This is the cultural background against which *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* was written, against which A-Na, though her tragic fate was obvious from the very start, tries to rebel.

### Sexual Naturalism

*Chi-po-zi-zhuan*, presented as the memoir of a Chinese woman's sexual history, predated the nearest counter-example from Western pornography, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill: The Memoir of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748), by at least 200 years. *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* might well be one of the first novels of this kind in world literature. The erotic descriptions are extremely vivid and are given with great psychological insights. In particular, A-Na's physical reactions as well as her emotional experience during her first sexual encounter with her cousin are described in elaborate detail. The story also contains an array of all possible positions and techniques of sexual intercourse. Though it is not possible to identify the true authorship and the gender of the author, the sensitivity of A-Na's sexual experience shows that if the author was not a woman he must at least have been a great sympathizer of woman.

The shock the publication of *Fanny Hill* presented in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England was due to its unashamed hedonism, vivid elaboration and celebration of sexual pleasure, all of which were in direct confrontation with the predominant Christian attitude toward sex. The negative approach to sex, associating sex with original sin, was the major cause

of sexual repression during the period.<sup>17</sup> It was clearly John Cleland's intention to write an erotic, pornographic novel for the entertainment of and consumption by male readers. The use of the first-person point of view, seen allegedly through the eyes of the female protagonist Fanny Hill, is obviously not a genuinely feminine point of view, but is rather a result of male sexual fantasy projected onto a female character. Female sexuality, then, becomes inviting for enjoyment by man without a feeling of guilt or sin. This open endorsement of sexual pleasure was of course not in line with the moral values laid down by the Christian church. This is why the Bishop of London at that time denounced the book as "an open insult upon Religion and good manners, and a reproach to the Honour of the Government, and the Law of the Country."<sup>18</sup> *Fanny Hill*, therefore, is pornographic in the sense that its description of sexual acts is meant to serve no other purpose than to excite sexual fantasy in the reader.

Obviously, the same intent can generally be attributed to writers of Chinese pornographic stories in the Ming and Qing periods. Novels like *Unofficial Records of the Embroidered Couch* (*Xiu-ta-ye-shi*, before 1600) or *Unofficial History of the Bamboo Garden* (*Zhu-lin-ye-shi*, before 1810) are good examples of what van Gulik calls "undiluted pornography."<sup>19</sup> Among these novels, the most important and famous is, of course, *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rou-pu-tuan* around 1644). Its authorship is ascribed to Li Yu (1611-1679/80), the original and great literary writer of the late Ming dynasty.<sup>20</sup> Patrick Hanan regards this

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<sup>17</sup> See Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Sin, Sickness and Sanity: A History of Sexual Attitudes*. New York: A Meridian Book, 1977.

<sup>18</sup> Editor's introduction to *Fanny Hill*. John Cleland, *Fanny Hill*, ed. Peter Wagner, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. 314. For a discussion of the pornographic novel in the late Ming period and for a summary of the above-mentioned novels, see pp. 299-317.

<sup>20</sup> There are different opinions between Chinese and Western scholars about the authorship of *Rou-pu-tuan*. Patrick Hanan, the most recent translator, assigns without doubt Li Yu as the author and has made an elaborated discussion of Li Yu and his literary works in *Chinese Vernacular Story*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 165-190. Chinese scholars, however, are not so sure about the authorship. They tend to consider Li Yu a possible candidate, but note that there is no substantial proof. See Li Mengsen, *Words on Chinese Forbidden Stories* (*Zhongguo jin hui xiaoshuo baihua*), 李夢生：《中國禁毀小說百話》。上海：上海古籍出版社，1994, p. 210.

novel as “the solitary classic of Chinese pornography,”<sup>21</sup> considering it as outdoing all other novels of the same genre with its description of the relentless quantification of sex, its fascination with woman’s sexuality, its emphasis on penis size, its account of the animal penis implant and its sexual orgies.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the exhortation of libertinism in the opening chapter might be a kind of manifesto for pornography and also for sexual promiscuity:

There is not a single worthy thing for the existence of man, as he is driven into never-ending toil and worries of daily life. It is therefore a great blessing for us that in the beginning of the universe the sage instituted sexual love between male and female, so that our sufferings and worries can be relieved through this activity. According to our egghead Confucian scholars, the loins below the waists of the women are the opening from which we are born and in which we die. However, from the views of the enlightened, if we are devoid of these things of the women in our lives, our hair might turn white a few years sooner and our lives will be shortened substantially [...]. We should understand that women can be treated as medicine, which is to be used neither too sparsely nor too frequently; and which is neither to be avoided nor to be excessively indulged in. Before we engage in sex with women, we should think that they are medicine and not poison, so why should we have any fear? But when we engage in sex, we should remind ourselves that this is medicine and not food, so we will not indulge in it. So doing, the *yin* and *yang* will mutually reinforce each other. Is it not of great benefit to man?<sup>23</sup>

After expounding the positive meaning of libertinism, the author did not forget to add a statement of moral justification for writing erotic novels. The whole purpose, according to the author, is to demonstrate

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<sup>21</sup> Patrick Hanan, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>22</sup> See the introduction of Patrick Hanan’s translation of *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, London: Arrow Books, 1990, p. x.

<sup>23</sup> 「人生在世，朝朝勞苦，事事愁煩，沒有一毫受用處。還虧那太古之世，開天闢地的聖人制一件男女交媾之情與人息息勞苦，解解愁煩，不至十分憔悴。照拘儒說來，婦人腰下之物乃生我之門，死我之戶；據達者看來，人生在世若沒有這件東西，祇怕頭髮還早白幾歲，壽算還略少幾歲……世上之人若曉得把女色當藥，不可太疏，亦不可太密；不可不好，亦不可酷好。未近女色之際，當思曰此藥也，非毒也，胡為懼之？既近女色之際，當思曰此藥也，非飯也，胡為溺之如此？則陽不亢陰不鬱，豈不有益於人哉？」

the meaning of retribution for one who is excessively indulging in sex and who seduces wives of other men. There is no use, says the author, in writing a moral treatise showing all the evils of sex because nobody likes to listen to a sermon. However, the warning of excessive sex should be implicitly infused in the erotic text. The author goes on to say:

It is better to use exactly erotic activities to persuade the reader of the evil. When he is very absolved in reading the story then a few notes of warning should be added at an unexpected place, so that the reader would say to himself with a sigh: "If having excessive sex with women would lead to such evil, it is important to save my own body for more future enjoyment rather than to die as the ghost of the peony flower; and it is more meaningful to do concrete business rather than to waste one's energy on empty deeds."<sup>24</sup>

However, such moral lecture on retribution and sexual evil does not diminish the fact that *Rou-pu-tuan* is indeed a pornographic novel. If we cut out all the sex scenes in the novel, there is not much left to read. Here is the distinction between *Rou-pu-tuan* and *Jin-ping-mei*, in which sex, despite its elaborated description, is not the sole theme. At the end of *Rou-pu-tuan*, our hero, after enjoying numerous beautiful women, comes to a sudden enlightenment. He realizes the emptiness of sexual excess and the meaning of retribution. He leaves the mundane world and becomes a Daoist master. The reader is left to wonder whether the hero received any actual punishment or had any genuine remorse for all the women whom he had seduced.

Almost all Chinese pornographic novels written in the period of the Ming and Qing dynasties have a moralistic statement as a cover. But it does not really matter as long as the story is erotic and entertaining and at the same time sexual lust is being excited.

Let us return to our novelette. Is *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* pornography? The answer is surely affirmative if we consider the abundant descriptions of sexual acts which fill a large number of pages in the novelette. Without sex there is little left in the novel. However, it is exactly the theme of feminine sexuality as presented in the book that is to be

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<sup>24</sup> 「不如就把色欲之事去勸動他，等他看到津津有味之時，忽然下幾句針砭之語，使他瞿然嘆道：『女色之可好如此，豈可不留行樂之身，常遠受用，而為牡丹花下之鬼，務虛名而去實際乎』」

questioned. For this particular novelette, the question how and why sex is presented and interpreted in this way is surely more important than the question whether or not the book is pornographic. Although the autobiographical presentation of *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* is unique, there was in the Chinese tradition no shortage of erotic novels featuring women as the heroines. The most famous ones from the Ming and Qing periods are *The Story of the Pleasing Gentlemen* (*Ru-yi-jun-zhuan*, 1514), *Unofficial History of the Bamboo Garden* (*Zhu-lin-ye-shi*, before 1810) and *Fascinating Stories of Zhao-yang* (*Zhao-yang-qu-shi*, 1621). The first is about the exorbitant sex life of Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty. The other two have sexual vampirism as their theme, and are stories about beautiful women preying on men. All three purport to have historical references, claiming that the heroines were real-life figures of the past.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it is hardly the intention of the three authors of the above-mentioned novels to present the books as historical stories. The major interest in each of the three books lies, of course, in the colorful details and variations of the sexual activities in which certain lustful women and their men engage. However, in each case, negative judgements are unmistakably imposed on the heroines. For a Chinese Emperor, it was a common and unquestionable practice to possess a great number of concubines and women. Sexual enjoyment was part of the life of an Emperor. Empress Wu, notwithstanding her being as powerful as any other Chinese emperor, was traditionally condemned as immoral for having a handful of male sexual partners. Her usurpation of the Tang throne was considered politically and morally wrong, and one of the reasons for her evil character was her never-satiable sexual lust. Such negative view against Empress Wu is implicit in *Ru-yi-jun-zhuan*. The heroines of the other two novels, *Zhu-lin-ye-shi* and *Zhao-yang-qu-shi*, are portrayed as vixen turned women coming down from the mountains to prey on men for achieving immortality by absorption of the male essence during intercourse. Women, in the final analysis, were evil and dangerous.

Compared with these stories, *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* is different, not in its erotic contents, which are as explicit and pornographic as the others, but in its language and the psychological insights embedded in the narration. As noted above, the novelette has a few outstanding features: the first-person account by A-Na of her development from sexual

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<sup>25</sup> For a summary of these stories, see Li Mengseng, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-29, 108-115, 393-398.

curiosity to maturity and finally to expertise in the act, the detailed psychological and emotional descriptions of feminine sexual experiences, and the use of elegant classical literary language. All these features make this novelette unique in Chinese literature. No other Chinese novels surpass *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* as far as these features are concerned.

A-Na's libertinism was a gradual process. The sexual instruction given to the adolescent A-Na by a female neighbor was a rare piece of realistic and educational statement of human sexuality. It began with a conception of sexuality in terms of the *yin-yang* cosmology, stressing the naturalism of all sexual activities. Then it was followed by a physiological explanation of the differences between the male and female sex organs. Finally it was a precise psychological description of the feelings during the first sexual intercourse: it "hurts subtly in the beginning and no joy is felt. [...] then it gradually develops into a joyous feeling and ultimately to ecstasy beyond the expression of words."<sup>26</sup> It was upon this instruction that A-Na's sexual adventure began. What is unusual about this introduction to the meaning of sex is certainly not just the idea of a sexual cosmology, which is quite common for other erotic novels as a naturalistic justification of sexual promiscuity, but a positive and active attitude toward female sexuality, an assertion of a woman's right to enjoy sex. Such view is in fact quite consistent with the more ancient idea of sexuality.

Chinese sexual naturalism has its foundation in *Yi-jing*. Human sexual relations are seen against a cosmic background of changes due to the interplay of the duality of *yin* and *yang*, heaven and earth, and the feminine and the masculine. "The successive movement of *yin* and *yang* constitutes the Way (*Dao*)."<sup>27</sup> In this theory, reciprocity and complementarity of the two genders are emphasized, and in that way, the equality between the two sexes is maintained. When religious Daoism develops this idea into the sexual theories of the bedchamber, the importance of the reciprocity is preserved. Joseph Needham rightly observes:

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<sup>26</sup> 「實隱隱有痛，初不知其樂，後漸覺其樂……美之至矣，真有莫得而形容者也。」

<sup>27</sup> 「一陰一陽之謂道」 trans. Wing-Tsit Chan in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 266.

The recognition of the importance of woman in the scheme of things, the acceptance of equality of woman with man, the conviction that the attainment of health and longevity needed the cooperation of the sexes, the considered admiration for certain feminine psychological characteristics, the incorporation of the physical phenomena of sex in numinous group catharsis, free alike from asceticism and class distinctions, reveal to us once more aspects of Daoism which had no counterpart in Confucianism or ordinary Buddhism.<sup>28</sup>

Such ideas are indeed reflected in the fundamental principles of the *Handbooks of Sex*. In the opening chapter of one of the important Handbooks, *The Master of the Cave Profound (Dong-xuan-zi)*, we read:

Of the myriad things begotten by heaven, man alone is the most precious. The place for man's being esteemed is in his moderation in sexual desire. He models Heaven, emulates Earth, adjusts to the female element, and conforms to the male element. Those who realize these principles cultivate their nature and prolong their years. Those who are contemptuous of its truths injure their spirits and prematurely shorten their years.<sup>29</sup>

However, one must not be mistaken that this sexual naturalism, with the apparent emphasis on sexual equality, was the fundamental principle governing human relationships outside sexual practice. The idea of womanhood as expounded by the Lady Ban-Chao of the late Han dynasty in her "Women's Percepts" has determined the submissive role of the woman in traditional Chinese culture. The education of woman, according to Ban's understanding of Confucianism, "ought to be aimed exclusively at teaching woman her inferiority to man, and inculcate in her absolute obedience to her husband."<sup>30</sup> Hence the idea of sexual equality was only a hypocritical pretext of exploitation of women by men.

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956, p. 151. For a more elaborated formulation, see Van Gulik, *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> Akira Ishihara & Howard Levy, *The Dao of Sex*, Yokohama: General Publishing Co., 1969, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Van Gulik, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

The significance of *Chi-po-zi-zhuan* can be considered as a critique of traditional Chinese Confucian morality by female sexuality. If A-Na's sexual promiscuity is a great sin, it is an even greater sin to be sexually incestuous with her father-in-law and brothers-in-law. However, the author writes with a sympathetic attitude towards A-Na. He describes the raping of A-Na by her in-laws with great disgust, remembering that all these men were well-established Confucian scholars. The author apparently approves of sexual naturalism and encourages A-Na to exercise her sexual right and choice. Traditionally, the sexual right was exercised with no problem at all by any Chinese man because he was allowed to be promiscuous, on condition that he did not violate the moral order of the family. Woman, however, had no such right, and for this reason A-Na was condemned. A-Na, being the victim of sexual exploitation, was a doomed tragic heroine who tried to assert her own sexual autonomy. On the other hand, not a single man among her sexual partners suffered any condemnation, with the exception of the tutor with whom she fell in love. This tutor "deserved" to be punished simply because he assumed the exclusive sexual access to A-Na. By exposing the hypocrisy of the Confucian family, the story of A-Na is a tragic rebellion against the dominant patriarchal sexual ideology in traditional China.